

Start Strong Council

General Recommendations Approved by the Council July 18, 2007

Please Note: A final report containing specific, detailed recommendations will be completed following the Council Meeting on July 17.

The Start Strong Council finds that increasing investment in early childhood education through expanded access to high quality preschool for four-year-olds holds the potential for desirable returns including greater school readiness, higher school achievement, and stronger employment opportunities, resulting in impressive benefits for the Commonwealth.

- Initial Report of the Start Strong Council, December 2006

Recommendation #1

Virginia should adopt a common definition of school readiness that is accepted and supported by all early childhood programs in both the public and private sector in order to facilitate the development of a common approach to evaluate pre-k program performance as well as the school readiness of Virginia's children.

A. Virginia should develop a strong infrastructure to support pre-K and school readiness evaluation, including adequate funding for a regular statewide program evaluation using developmentally appropriate assessments that help us to ensure programs that provide high quality experiences for children.

B. Virginia should contract with a qualified college, university, or research institution to prepare an annual Virginia School Readiness Report that will assess the status of kindergarten children's readiness. The report will illustrate the role of pre-k and related programs in preparing children for kindergarten, and shall examine students' literacy, math and socio-emotional skills, while taking into account differences in student backgrounds. The report shall also seek alignment with the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).

C. Virginia should create a school readiness task force to direct the preparation and use of the School Readiness Report and make recommendations to enhance children's access to high quality pre-k.

Recommendation #2

Virginia should develop a collaborative, coordinated approach to delivery of a high quality preschool program by development of a state level office to consolidate existing relevant early childhood programs; and should engender collaborative leadership councils at the local level.

A. The state level office should receive policy direction by an advisory Board selected by the Governor and should be accountable to a specified administrator. The Board should be made up of members of the Governor's Working Group as well as additional members from the nonprofit and provider communities.

Recommendation #3

Virginia should adopt a voluntary 5-star rating system that promotes program quality based on the statewide QRIS developed by the Alignment Project team for preschool programs in both public and private settings. Phased-in implementation of the initiative should be supported through pilots in diverse communities and settings as well as adequate funding for technical assistance and mentoring to meet quality standards. State-funded preschool programs serving four-year olds should be held accountable for meeting a minimum quality rating.

A. The QRIS should address staff qualifications, classroom interactions, the learning environment, instructional practices, and partnerships with families and communities, and should include mechanisms for quality assessment, technical assistance for quality improvement, and reporting for all participating programs.

B. State-funded programs should be required to achieve a minimum quality rating.

Recommendation #4

Virginia should support a coordinated system of professional development in order to ensure a strong early childhood professional workforce.

A. Working with relevant agencies and institutions, increase availability and access to appropriate education and training programs aligned with competencies identified as desirable for early childhood professionals.

B. Develop appropriate professional licensure, credentialing, and certifications as well as relevant programs to acquire these designations. Develop and promote a user-friendly career lattice to facilitate professional development planning.

Recommendation #5

Virginia should use both direct investment and incentives to build capacity and raise quality in the early childhood education system over a period of three to five years, taking into account the direct and indirect costs of providing high quality preschool programs in a comprehensive early childhood system, including effective program administration, evaluation, quality assurance, technical assistance and monitoring, and workforce development costs.

Direct Investment:

A. Though the Council finds that benefits from high quality preschool accrue to children of both lower- and middle-income families and to children with varied risk factors, state and local government funding should be targeted initially to increase access for children who are at risk of educational failure, many of whom are not served by the existing Virginia Preschool Initiative.

B. State policies should promote braiding of multiple funding streams, encouraging programs to leverage state, federal, and local preschool and child care subsidy funds,

private grant funds, private tuition payments, and other sources to support early childhood education programs and wraparound services (before and/or after school child care) to meet the needs of working families. Parents should contribute to the cost of preschool education to the extent they can afford it. Sliding scale and fixed tuition schedules expand access to programs and create economically diverse classrooms for preschool children; these models should be evaluated and replicated as appropriate to expand access to quality preschool more broadly.

Incentives

A. Virginia should provide incentives for individuals to gain the education, training and skills necessary to provide high-quality early childhood education. Incentives for this purpose may include tuition assistance, subsidized student loans, loan forgiveness programs, tax deductions and/or credits and increased compensation based on educational attainment.

B. Virginia should provide incentives for private sector partners to develop the facilities to accommodate expanded access to quality preschool. As well, incentives could be provided to encourage employers and private child care providers to develop and maintain high quality preschool programs, or to raise the level of quality in existing programs, by creating business tax credits or deductions linked to program quality ratings (QRIS). Relevant incentives should be provided for faith-based and other non profit providers as well.

C. Virginia should continue to provide incentives for parents to select high quality preschool opportunities for their children, and should promote existing federal and state tax benefits for this purpose.

D. Virginia should consider financial incentives in high composite index localities to reduce the current composite index funding discrepancies across the Commonwealth.

Recommendation #6

Virginia should work with business, education, and philanthropic organizations to broaden public understanding of early childhood education, helping to explain its long-range social and economic importance for all citizens.